

# The Builder.

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**C** All the problems which now perplex the mind of Europe, the proper adjustment of the rights and duties of Employers and the Employed is the most pressing and the most difficult. Earnestly and anxiously do we look for its worthy solution: earnestly and anxiously do we hope that both classes will exhibit mutual forbearance and consideration. Modifications must come; but pending the decision of them, let us all, whether workman or master, endeavour to discharge faithfully those obligations which our present position obviously involves,—those obligations which Reason, Justice, Kindliness, Charity, make immutable.

The differences between the body called "The Amalgamated Society of Engineers and Mechanics," and the Employers of operative engineers, to which we alluded last week, have taken a fearfully serious aspect, involving not merely immediate injury, privation, and enforcing to thousands of individuals, but ultimate loss to the whole nation.

The demands of the society, made to a leading firm, in the first instance were,—

"1. The abolition of overtime, excepting in case of break down.

"2. When overtime is absolutely necessary that it should be paid for at double rates.

"3. The abolition of the system of piece-work.

"4. The unconditional discharge of all labourers, or such class of persons at present engaged in working planing machines, or tools of similar character, and the employment in their stead of mechanics, members of the Union."

These were accompanied with the threat of a strike on December 31, in the event of non-compliance. This threat the council afterwards repudiated, but they maintain their intention of "abolishing piece-work and overtime," and of otherwise, as is inferred, "organising labour." The masters, feeling the insecurity of their position under such notices, and the evils that would follow on both sides if such dictation were yielded to, have associated themselves together in self-defence, and have resolved, unless the demands be withdrawn, entirely to close their establishments on the 10th inst. Their views may be gathered from the following resolutions, which were passed by them unanimously on the 24th ult. :—

"1. That while this nation, by its representatives in Parliament, has abolished guild privileges, exclusive charters of corporate handicrafts, restrictions on the export of machinery or free egress from the realm of skilled workmen, and all monopolies, the foregoing requisitions of the Amalgamated Society are an attempt to ignore the right of every British subject to dispose of his labour or capital according to his individual views of his own interest—to deprive the skilled workman of the natural advantages of his superiority—forcibly to compel the industrious and careful mechanic to share the profits of his assiduity and dexterity with the slothful and inept—and deliberately to deprive the unskilled labourer of the means of employment.

"2. That the dependence of the public prosperity

upon the steady and uninterrupted pursuit of mechanical industry renders it essential to the economical development of practical engineering enterprises, to the protection of the community from exorbitant prices, of the capitalist from becoming the slave of his own hands, and of the steady and able workman from encroachment upon his independent rights of labour, that the threats conveyed in the foregoing manifesto of dictation to employers and tyranny over the employed should be promptly and presumptuously resisted.

"3. That while the division of labour, which is essential to the profitable prosecution of mechanical enterprises, renders the employment of one denomination of workmen dependent upon the co-operation of those engaged in other departments, the threatened strike of the Amalgamated Society, by withdrawing certain classes of artisans from the factory, must have the effect of throwing their fellow-workmen out of employment, by compelling masters to close their establishments until the combinations of skilled labour, interrupted by the secession of the members of the Union, can be supplied."

We have no desire to encourage working over-time: employers, as a matter of course, never resort to it unless forced, inasmuch as they unquestionably get less work for their money than in the ordinary course. But that any society, "amalgamated" or otherwise, should endeavour to establish as a law that masters *shall not* allow operatives to work over-time,—that full-grown responsible men shall not be permitted to work over-time,—seems to be scarcely credible. It is perfectly well known that the men regard permission to work over-time as a privilege, and we are compelled to regard the demand simply as a war-cry and a pretext on the part of those who act for the operatives. With what class of men is this prevention to stop? And why, if a "resolution" can settle the matter, should not eight hours, six hours, four hours daily, be long enough for work? Would that it might be so! And may they not employ any of their over-time in any other calling with a view to improving their means? Certainly not; because in that case the members of the calling so invaded could, on the same grounds as those set forth by the "Amalgamated Society of Machinists," at once interfere and prevent them. Those, of any class, who are not workers in over-time, have little chance of effecting for themselves an advance. Let them advise their fellow-workmen to cease working over-time and to spend the evenings in improving their minds: let them warn them against accepting good employment at piece-work (which tends to set the industrious and skilful above the idle and unskilful) if they will; but to pay that men shall not do one or accept the other in this the 19th century—this the era of free-trade—seems absurd and incomprehensible.

The demand for the dismissal of the labourers employed on machines, and the substitution for them of skilled workmen (where skill would not be needed and so would be thrown away), is a cry against machinery, and is to increase the cost of production. Would other countries do so too? Certainly not; and those who produce cheapest and best will sell most."

The Amalgamated Society propose, it seems, in the event of the masters closing, to take the place of the employers, and, as far as the public may supply them with orders, to carry on the ordinary business of their respective trades. They have determined—

"1st. That 10,000*l.* of the funds of the Amalgamated Society shall be paid over to such number of trustees, not less than six, as are

\* This demand has been withdrawn.

selected by the executive, each trustee to be man in whom public confidence would be placed in consequence of their position in society; and to advance portions of the same from time to time, to managers appointed by the executive (whose appointments are to be afterwards confirmed by the society), for the purpose of carrying on the business of engineers, machinists, &c.

"2nd. These advances, as well as others which the trustees may obtain from other sources, shall be secured by a mortgage of all the plant and stock in trade employed in each business, to the said trustees, who shall have a power to give a preference security to any such other advances over sums advanced out of the funds of the Amalgamated Society.

"3. The conditions of work under which such business is carried on shall be such as are approved of by the executive of the Amalgamated Society, from time to time, with the view of giving employment to the greatest possible number of members of the trade who are out of employment for the time being, consistently with the stability of the business, and the welfare of the workmen employed."

Much may be done by a co-operative body of workmen; but from an association under the present circumstances, we should not expect a favourable result. If the profits of masters were so large that operatives working as joint masters, with the disadvantages necessarily attending such an arrangement, could pay for the capital required, and obtain larger wages and freer rules than they now enjoy, other capitalists would come into the trade, and producing thus a greater demand for men, the rate of wages would rise. At this moment, so far as we can learn, the masters are not realizing large profits; and, if they had to pay greater wages, which, after all, is the result looked for in all such movements, they could not compete with foreign rivals, trade would be checked, the capital now employed in it be diverted into other channels, fewer workmen would be needed, and the competition for employment becoming greater, wages would naturally fall. It is often urged that manufacturers should not avail themselves of the reduction in wages brought about by competition or other causes, but continue to pay the former higher rate. This, however, is not to be expected, and if it were attempted could not possibly last. As a writer in the current number of the *Westminster Review* justly remarks :—

"The manufacturer who, by rejecting those who offered their services at reduced wages, attempted to keep up an artificial price of labour, would soon find himself distanced in the race: his competitors would be carrying on their establishments at less cost than himself: his means would be crippled, and his profits disappear and be replaced by loss; and the ultimate effect of his unscientific benevolence would be, that his power of doing practical good would be at an end. If it were attempted to evade this consequence by maintaining the artificial price of labour by legislative or by any over-riding social influence, and the attempt should be successful, the only result would be the transference of our superiority to foreign rivals and the diminution of demand for our fettered productions. The individual manufacturer in the one case, the whole nation of manufacturers in the other, would find that the issue of their kindness—the consequence of their resolution to give good wages only to a few—would end in their having no wages at all to give to any. The plain truth is, that neither the most boundless benevolence, nor the most consummate ability, can fight against the clear moral and material laws of the universe. If the field of employment is too limited for the numbers who crowd into it, no power and no goodness can prevent wages from falling; and all schemes, whether old or new, for enabling labourers to be redundant, and yet to evade the consequences of their redundancy, must come to nought."

What we want is a movement for educa-